

# Reaching Back and Casting Forward: Healing the Connective Tissue

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## Abstract

The impact of historic trauma on Native American and Black Americans is central to understanding widespread social, health and economic disparities in these populations today. Too often the systems that intersect with Native American and Black Americans overlook or misunderstand the history of genocide and slavery that manifests in individuals, families and communities' health and capacity to thrive. Our challenge - and opportunity - is to embed and norm cultural healing practices into daily lives, organizational cultures and systems in order to heal the wounds of our ancestors so that we may not transmit them to subsequent generations. Holding onto a dominant culture framework that prioritizes the efforts and perceived failures of the *individual* makes it difficult to see the interconnectedness of all the parts of a whole – whether a human being, community or system. Native American and Black American cultural norms tend toward a communal, collective experience in both the wounding and the healing. Adopting “trauma-informed” policies and practices has been an important first step in recognizing that trauma exists in human minds, bodies and spirits, but has proven insufficient for us to move beyond simply being *informed* of the presence of trauma to having practices and models in place to consistently interrupt the multi-generational transmission of that trauma. A healing-centered framework is required, one that is grounded in and led by the wisdom and narrative of those most impacted by historical trauma.

### **Introduction: Historic Trauma as Root Cause**

From 2003 – 2014 I led a non-profit organization in the urban Indian community called the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center (MIWRC). The organization provided an array of trauma informed services, prioritizing culturally grounded interventions to address sexual violence, addiction, homelessness, child welfare interventions and poor health outcomes prevalent in Native communities.

These services were addressing the manifestations of historic trauma-- a complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who

share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance. <sup>1</sup> Historic trauma has been experienced by many groups, notably survivors of the Holocaust, genocide, and slavery. Some of the earliest research into transgenerational or historic trauma impact has been with the offspring of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> Author Adam Frankel, a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, writes in his memoir *“The Survivors: A Story of War, Inheritance and Healing”* (Harper Collins) of the inherited “climate of secrecy and buried pain” that marked his upbringing and how it informed his own relationships. <sup>3</sup>

The trauma experienced by the ancestors is handed down to us through our genetic makeup and normed behaviors and narratives. Epigenetics, the study of how behaviors and environment cause changes to our DNA, has shown that traumatic stress can alter genes and make the fetus susceptible to trauma influence prior to birth. The effects of post-traumatic stress and racial trauma have been identified as having transgenerational effects.<sup>4</sup> These effects can be behavioral and include difficulty concentrating, emotional outbursts, withdrawal, depression and/or hypervigilance, or show up as physical ailments including fatigue, headache, digestive trouble and other ailments.

These wounds were starkly visible in the families who came through our doors at MIWRC. Adopting trauma-informed practices was an important start but ultimately insufficient to support transformational healing. We were striving to mend multi-generational wounds with what felt like band aids, addressing racial injustice by tackling the symptoms of trauma rather than the root cause. It felt highly inadequate, and we were not sustainably moving the needle in any meaningful way.

Effective sector and systemic responses to social, health and economic disparities must fully account for the root causes of this suffering. Native American and other Black, Brown and Immigrant People in the United States may also be routinely subject to the compounding

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<sup>1</sup> Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; [American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center \(cuanschutz.edu\)](http://cuanschutz.edu)

<sup>2</sup> [What Does It Mean to Heal From Historical Trauma? | Journal of Ethics | American Medical Association \(ama-assn.org\)](http://ama-assn.org)

<sup>3</sup> [Holocaust Trauma and its Effects, Generations Later | Princeton Alumni Weekly](http://princeton.edu)

<sup>4</sup> [EpigeneticsandIntergenerationalTrauma.pdf](http://epigeneticsandintergenerationaltrauma.pdf)

trauma of systemic racism, but historic or transgenerational trauma is experienced by any human being whose forebearers were subject to war, genocide, famine, enslavement, systems of oppression or sexual violence.

This paper explores how historic trauma, also known as transgenerational trauma or ancestral wounds, is the root of many inequities in the United States and posit that these ancestral wounds are reflected in physical, spiritual, and mental health today. We will examine how prioritizing culturally grounded practices may heal those who suffered historic trauma and deter the transmission of trauma to the next generation, with a focus on emerging work taking place in Native American and Black American communities in Minnesota.

### **Historic Trauma's Impact**

Historic trauma leaves a profound scar on survivors and their descendants. The colonization of Indigenous peoples on this land disrupted family and community systems and culture-based protective factors. In the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Native American children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools run by religious or government institutions. The goal was to assimilate Native people into colonial, Christian ways of living. Many of these children never returned home. Those who did often suffered from physical and sexual abuse, were disconnected from their language, culture, and family, and had not had the benefit of nurturing parents and extended family care. Native researchers Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra Debuyn have written extensively on historic trauma:

*“The destructive and shaming messages inherent in the boarding school system...were that American Indian families are not capable of raising their own children and that American Indians are culturally and racially inferior. Spiritually and emotionally, the children were bereft of culturally integrated behaviors that led to positive self-esteem, a sense of belonging to family and community. They were ill-prepared for raising their own children.”<sup>5</sup>*

A recent report from the United States Department of Interior outlines how boarding schools systematically attempted to eradicate Native people and culture. “The consequences of federal

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<sup>5</sup> Yellow Horse Brave Heart M and DeBruyn L, (1998). The American Indian holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief, *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 8(2), [American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center \(cuanschutz.edu\)](http://cuanschutz.edu)

Indian boarding school policies—including the intergenerational trauma caused by the family separation and cultural eradication inflicted upon generations of children as young as 4 years old—are heartbreaking and undeniable,” said Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland. “We continue to see the evidence of this attempt to forcibly assimilate Indigenous people in the disparities that communities face.”<sup>6</sup>

Historic trauma also disproportionately impacts Black Americans whose ancestors were held in slavery and suffered the injustices of the Jim Crow era. Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes stemming from the late nineteenth century that legalized racial segregation, denying Black Americans the right to vote, access to education, or employment. They nurtured and supported a racist environment, fostering the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other extremist groups. Black American families were also disconnected from traditional culture-based protective factors and community supports by slavery and these subsequent violent and oppressive policies and practices. Ancestral wounds are passed down to living generations and are compounded by persistent institutional and systemic racist policies and practices. Dr. Joy DeGruy calls it *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)*, “a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery”<sup>7</sup>. The harm of slavery and oppression, she says, has resulted in damaging survival behaviors that are often transmitted across generations as norms.

As individuals, families and communities attempt to come to grips with the impact of historic trauma, the mainstream systems these families intersect with are lagging behind in awareness and appropriate response. Education, health, criminal justice, and child welfare systems too often perpetuate the trauma by embedding dominant culture paradigms that are not resonant with cultural communities into their policies and practices and by punishing those exhibiting survival behaviors that may be linked to generational wounds. A child who lashes out in the schoolroom may be acting out of complex, historic trauma, or may be hungry and exhausted, and is likely to be seen as “delinquent” and punished rather than helped.

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<sup>6</sup> [Interior Department Releases In\) Interior Department Releases Indian Boarding School Report | Currents \(nativenewsonline.net\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome | Dr. Joy DeGruy](#)

Trauma is stored in the mind, body, and spirit, yet our physical and mental health care systems are relegated to diagnostic processes that are largely focused on physical ailments or cognitive dysregulation of the *individual*. Nurturing our wellbeing is dependent upon fostering healing of mind, body, and spirit within the context of community. Our collective responsibility starts with our inner work and affects those around us.

### **Interrupting the Generational Transmission of Trauma**

People under great duress and oppressed over time will develop coping mechanisms to survive, and pass those survival behaviors to their offspring. Survival behaviors are rooted in the part of the brain known as the amygdala, also called survival brain, which constantly scans for and reacts to threats both real and perceived by activating the sympathetic nervous system.<sup>8</sup> This nervous system response floods the body with stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline in preparation to deal with the threat. It manifests in physical ways including rapid respiration, tensed muscles and slowed digestion. Behavioral response involves some variation of fight, flight or freeze, which may include aggressive, passive aggressive and/or self-depreciating behaviors, withdrawal, numbing or inability to make decisions. When in survival brain, we cannot access our pre-frontal cortex, the part of our brain where all our creative problem solving, compassion and non-judgmental thinking reside.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the release of stress hormones adds inflammation to our systems, exacerbating and feeding chronic inflammatory health conditions and tamping down our immune functions. The amygdala response has allowed us to survive and cope as a species for centuries and can become a reliable habitual response to stressful situations. Trauma survivors often repeat the same coping behaviors far beyond the traumatic event itself. Those behaviors may then be transmitted to those closest to them. In a recent workshop on cultural healing, one young woman, a survivor of rape and generational trauma, shared her story. She had been learning to practice interrupting her survival brain response to stress when one day found herself yelling at her twelve-year old son for not cleaning his room. Seeing the fear in his eyes, she realized this was her ancestral trauma response activating her amygdala. She stopped and explained what

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<sup>8</sup> [Understanding Emotions: Origins and Roles of the Amygdala - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Traumatic stress: effects on the brain - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

was happening in her mind and body when she felt out of control. She taught him some simple calming breathing exercises that they could do together when they felt stressed or were in conflict situations. The result was less tension and a closer relationship between mother and son.<sup>10</sup> When we heal our own wounds, it directly affects and improves our health, behavior and relationships and radiates outwards to those around us, interrupting the multi-generational cycle of despair.

### **The Healing Impact of Culturally-Based Practices**

The generational stories that we share help shape our worldview. The National Library of Medicine recognizes that the narrative for specific groups connecting present day experiences to historical ones has a significant influence on mental and physical health and seeks to identify how *our actions today* – including reframing the narrative and behaviors - may shift the trajectory for future generations.<sup>11</sup> A good story can help people feel more connected. It releases oxytocin, a “feel good” hormone that engages the brain. As one Native blogger notes, “When a person can identify their role in their own story as well as the individual elements of their story, they can then begin to understand their lives and the world they’re part of in a way most people never experience”.<sup>12</sup>

Multiple authors have noted the healing power of culturally traditional practices. The Journal of Black Psychology shares the example of C-HeARTS, or Community Healing and Resistance Through Storytelling, a community healing framework incorporating story, connectedness and justice. The authors note that “Although not unique to Africana communities, storytelling is a rich oral tradition found to be an effective healing intervention.”<sup>13</sup> The oral tradition of storytelling is just one example of a protective factor and a tool to advance collective healing.

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<sup>10</sup> Personal story recounted at professional immersion learning session on Healing Historic Trauma held at Liberty Northside Healing Space, Minneapolis, MN. November 30, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> [Historical trauma as public narrative: a conceptual review of how history impacts present-day health PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> [The Science Behind the Healing Power of Storytelling \(nativehope.org\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Community Healing and Resistance Through Storytelling: A Framework to Address Racial Trauma in Africana Communities - Nkechinyelum A. Chioneso, Carla D. Hunter, Robyn L. Gobin, Shardé McNeil Smith, Ruby Mendenhall, Helen A. Neville, 2020 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

Understanding the dynamics of historic trauma and epigenetics and the ways in which our human central nervous systems react to trauma, while supporting healing practices that are developed and shared by Native and Black Americans can lay the foundation for healing bodies, minds and spirits across the generations.

In North Minneapolis, Liberty Northside Healing Space is bringing the rich cultural traditions of the Black Church to a healing centered community engagement model. Liberty approaches healing trauma and widespread sexual violence through “rest, remembrance, resistance and revival...rooted in deep community wisdom, ancient healing practices, foundational beliefs of the African American church and participatory research.” Healing centered engagement is a strength-based approach to trauma that promotes a holistic view of healing from trauma and recognizes the human potential in all of us. It understands the collective and communal experience of historic trauma and recenters culture as central to wellbeing.<sup>14</sup> Liberty’s CEO Reverend Dr. Alika Galloway confirms:

*“The African-American community has cultural ways of healing that have brought us thus far. We understand the power of story, of communal impact, of love and laughter and of owning our culture! These cultural ways center us into a profound healing nexus that transcends the collective impact of trauma and propels us to a place of healing, wholeness and well-being.”*

Grounding our stories in the harms of the past may reinforce feelings of anger, fear, or helplessness. While acknowledging past harms and holding those responsible accountable, it is also crucial to connect to the stories and practices of resilience and healing. In Native communities across North America, Elders and spiritual leaders are reconnecting people with the traditional ceremonies, language, food and practices that were once banned by the federal government, but that allowed Native people to not only survive the devastating impact of boarding schools and genocidal policies, but to thrive.

In South Minneapolis, home to one of the largest urban Native American populations in the country, the Native American Community Clinic, a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), has integrated traditional medicines and elder wisdom into all their physical, behavioral and dental

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<sup>14</sup> [Northside Healing Space | Liberty Community Church \(libertychurchmpls.org\)](https://libertychurchmpls.org)

health clinical services. Elder-in-Residence staff share cultural medicines, ceremony, and mind/body/spirit healing work for patients across program areas. Young Warrior Camps teach young men and boys that a true warrior cares for self and community through healing and compassion. This culturally grounded approach has led to an increased acceptance and utilization of care, particularly among homeless populations and those suffering from substance use disorders. NACC’s CEO Dr. Antony Stately noted:

*“Over the past five years since we launched cultural healing, we have learned that traditional and spiritual practices in a clinical environment create a sense of belonging for Native relatives who have been disconnected from health care.”*<sup>15</sup>

### **Nurturing and Operationalizing Strategy**

The examples provided here are but a snapshot of the emergent work being led by Native and Black communities. How might we use these examples to nurture and operationalize a strategy for living into the world of possibilities that we want to create? The stories and practices of culturally grounded individual and collective healing must be shared on a grander scale, so that they may become widely available, accessible, and normed. A persistent belief that only academically and/or clinically vetted data and practice is valid restrains access to and acceptance of cultural wisdom and healing. Philanthropic and government entities who rely solely on these data for validation are missing the opportunity of investing in community-led, process-oriented solutions. Lessons learned at the Minnesota Indian Women’s Resource Center illustrate how philanthropy can catalyze this transformational shift by pivoting from dominant cultural habits to a more relational, open, and exploratory process.

### **Healing Fosters Systems Change**

One example of this kind of philanthropic innovation is the Catalyst Initiative, founded by the George Family Foundation in Minneapolis in 2014. The Catalyst Initiative piloted community-based and led trauma healing practices and learned that investing in culturally grounded trauma healing work had profound impact on individuals and communities. Among the Initiative’s evaluation findings were “Self-care and healing improves the capacity of people to meet the needs of those they work with and care for”, and “Learning to self-regulate and

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<sup>15</sup> [NACC \(nacc-healthcare.org\)](http://nacc-healthcare.org)



identify/set boundaries positively benefits individuals, organizations and interrelationships”.

The evaluation report highlights what is required to activate this transformation:

“Transforming networks from dominant paradigms to ones centered on wellbeing and healing requires intention, commitment, perseverance, care, forgiveness and grace for others and ourselves. It must allow for exploration without blame or shame.”<sup>16</sup>

Systems have often devalued Native and Black ancestor healing practices and have insisted upon dominant-culture based criteria and evidence-based models as gold standards. Normalizing ancestral healing practices within community, non-profit, healthcare, education and other systems is affordable, becoming better known, and can be done in a sustainable and replicable way. We are also learning that fostering post-traumatic growth through widespread use of cultural healing as a primary prevention strategy has a ripple impact, gathering a critical mass of change agents who then inform the systems with whom they are in relationship.

### **Larger Implications**

Boarding schools and Jim Crow laws are egregious, historic examples of clutching power, but there is still much work to be done today to foster equitable systems and right relationships between Native and Black communities and the systems with whom they intersect. Transformational work is nurtured when all stakeholders give themselves permission to engage in their own healing work. Leaders who operate from historic survival brain habits will not be able to fully access their creative problem-solving and compassionate capacity and may be easily triggered and reactive rather than strategic and grounded in relational decision-making. Acquiring daily practices to settle our central nervous system facilitates this shift from reactive to proactive and reduces burn out and internal conflict in sectors where daily trauma exposure is routine. Within government and philanthropic systems, this means being willing to look at how internal processes and habits have essentially acted as enforcement mechanisms to maintain power. Righting the wrongs of generational wounds does not take place within grant cycles, election cycles or quarterly plans, it happens at the speed of trust and resides in our own willingness to be vulnerable as human beings. Helping set the conditions for individuals and

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<sup>16</sup> A Network of Wellbeing: Catalyst Evaluation Report 2014 – 2022. Inspire to Change. Available at ([www.catalystnorth.org/resources/](http://www.catalystnorth.org/resources/)).

communities to thrive necessitates a willingness to re-examine perspectives, let go of sector habits, foster belief in the human capacity for healing, and hold space for uncertainty and emergence. As one Catalyst Initiative community partner said:

*“When you have spaciousness and latitude you can do great things. But when you are in survival mode all the time because of your own traumatic history, you don’t have good practices and you have all the wounds that come from that and we react from a place of hurt and fear”.*

To restore wholeness individually and collectively begins with understanding that as an individual, one is part of a community and collective humanity. The choices we make today inform how subsequent generations remember and tell the story of both trauma *and* wisdom and foster the conditions for collective healing as the antidote to collective historic wounding. We can interrupt the transmission of historic trauma and replace it with the sharing of historical wisdom, which will in turn allow us to create the world we wish to leave for the next seven generations.

*“You impact one, you impact the next seven generations, right? It’s our children, our grandchildren, the grandchildren of others. Rather than intergenerational trauma being passed along, we’re going to pass along intergenerational healing.”.* Catalyst Initiative Community Partner evaluation interview, August, 2022. White Earth Reservation, Minnesota.

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